

Introduction to the Divine Council

Michael S. Heiser, PhD

Excerpted from Mike's book in progress
(Chapter 3; footnotes not included)

To this point we've learned that even before the very beginning of creation God was not alone. There was a second, uncreated person with him, who shared his own essence and was an independent, but not autonomous, being. As Christians we are familiar with this second person by such terms as "the Son," and we believe that this second "deity person" became incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth. In the Old Testament, "the Son" is manifest physically and visually, but is referred to by other names, such as Wisdom and the Word. There are several other names taken by "the Son" in the Old Testament, and we'll get to them. For now, though, we need to look at the other members of God's family and their relationship to "the Son."

I put "the Son" in quotation marks and used capitalization in the above paragraph to draw your attention. God's co-ruler and co-creator, the second deity person we think of as "the Son" since we are living after the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of that person, is qualitatively different than God's other sons. That will be made clear as we progress. And if you just asked yourself, "what other sons?" you're tracking—and you wouldn't be alone. God's other sons are the focus of this chapter and the next. What we'll discuss here and in the next chapter is one of the most neglected, misunderstood, side-stepped—and critical—doctrinal areas in the Old Testament. In fact, it is the backdrop for most of New Testament theology.

I don't make that last assertion lightly. I'm not saying that without an understanding of this issue you can't comprehend the Bible. I'm saying that without it you can't comprehend it precisely or fully, or even well. You will inevitably miss out on the context for much of what goes on in the New Testament, a context understood and utilized by the apostles at every turn. Remember back in the introduction when I talked about how the church has been missing the ancient context for its theology for millennia? How we've lost the ancient Israelite and first century lenses for understanding what's going on in the Bible? Well, if the first two chapters haven't demonstrated that for you, the next few will. Read prayerfully and closely, because you'll never look at your Bible the same way again once you meet God's original heavenly family—the sons of God.

We'll start our introduction with an obscure but important passage, Job 38:4-7. God is challenging Job, who wanted to know why he was suffering. God's general answer in Job 38-42 is that he doesn't need to explain himself because he's God. Part of that response reads:

⁴Where were you [Job] when I laid the foundations of the earth?

Speak if you have understanding!

⁵Who fixed its dimensions? Surely you know!

Or who measured it with a line?

⁶On what were its bases sunk?

Who set its cornerstone,
7When the morning stars sang together
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?

There's a lot to be said about this passage. First, you probably noticed that God is basically asking Job (sarcastically) where Job was when God created the earth. God refers to the time when he laid earth's "foundations," fixed and measured its "dimensions," sank its "bases," and set its "cornerstone." Second, you also no doubt noticed the underlined portion. We learn from this text that, at the very moment of earth's creation, there were *already* a number of "sons of God." These sons of God shouted for joy when they saw God's creative power and handiwork. You might be thinking the sons of God are the angels. That's a common assumption, but it's wrong since the Hebrew word for angels (*mal'akim*) is completely different than the Hebrew behind "sons of God" (more on that below). Third, you may have discerned that the two lines of verse 7 parallel each other. That is, the sons of God who shout for joy are also identified as "morning stars" who "sang together." Such parallelism is the major feature of Hebrew poetry: one line renames or repeats another. I won't lapse into a lecture on Hebrew poetry—just make a mental note of the parallel, that the sons of God are identified with the heavenly starry host.

The passage raises some questions. Maybe you're wondering if we can be sure that God's description really does refer to the creation of the earth. I'm going to keep my promise to save all the data that proves this for an appendix.¹ By way of just one proof for now, though, you should know that the Hebrew words in Job for "laying the foundations" are the same words as used in other verses that undoubtedly refer back to the creation of the earth (see Psalm 102:25 [Hebrew, 26]; 104:5; Prov. 8:29; Isa. 48:13; 51:13, 16). One verse in that list should jump out at you right away—Proverbs 8:29. That's the passage we read in Chapter One, where Wisdom claimed to be at God's side serving as his assistant in creation! This is clear biblical testimony that the sons of God who watched the show were watching God *and* his co-creator in action. They were all there—*before there were human beings*.

Why would I emphasize that last line when it seems so painfully obvious? Because many Christian pastors and professors teach that the phrase "sons of God" refers to humans! Granted, they do not make that mistake in this passage—the supernatural character of the sons of God is irrefutable in Job 38 since humans were not yet created. However, in other passages, it is argued by not a few that "sons of God" refers to human beings. The reason for this misguided conclusion requires a bit of background.

In the original Hebrew, the phrase "sons of God" in Job 38:7 is *beney elohim*.² You might recognize *elohim* as one of God's names. In fact, it is the most common name for Israel's God, despite the fact that its "shape" or spelling is *plural*. (Yes, you read correctly—*plural*). Hebrew actually has two generic words for "God" (or any other foreign "god"): the more common is *el*; the other is *eloah*. In English we normally make words plural by adding "-s" or "-es" to words ("rats"; "horses"). In Hebrew, plurals of masculine nouns end with "-im" (and God is always described with masculine pronouns

in the Bible – “he”; “him”). The word *elohim* is the plural of *eloah*; the plural of *el* is *elim*.

The above discussion means that the word *elohim* all by itself can refer to either “God” (capitalized, the God of Israel) or “gods” (other divine beings). We have to wait for the word to be put into a sentence to know which meaning is the focus. We have words like this in English. For example, the word “sheep” can be either singular or plural. By itself we cannot tell which option is correct. If we put “sheep” into the sentence, “The sheep is lost,” we know only one sheep is meant since the verb “is” requires its subject to be singular. Likewise, “the sheep are lost” informs us that more than one sheep is in view.

Over two thousand occurrences of the word *elohim* in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament point to the singular God of Israel. We know this because of the grammar of the sentences in which the word occurs, as well as context. Job 38:4 obviously refers to the God of Israel since the grammar there has the creator speaking in the first person singular (“*I* laid the foundations of the earth”). At other times, God is referred to as *ha-elohim*, with the Hebrew definite article (the word for “the”) in front of *elohim*. It was written this way to signal that the God of Israel was “THE God” (par excellence) among all other gods. The grammar and context of any particular occurrence helps the reader make the decision about what to do with *elohim*.

It shouldn’t be surprising that since God can be referred to as *elohim* and *ha-elohim* the Hebrew Old Testament attaches the phrase “the sons of” to both forms of God’s name. At times the Hebrew text refers to the sons of God as *beney elohim* and at other times as *beney ha-elohim*. There is no difference in meaning. In the same manner, the Hebrew text occasionally reads *beney elim*—with the meaning “sons of God” (though plural in shape, *elim* refers to the singular God in that phrase, just like *elohim* does).³ One verse (see Psalm 82:6 below) uses the phrase *beney elyon* (“sons of the Most High”), since *elyon* is yet another name for God.

The thought might have occurred to you that when the Hebrew writers referred to the God of Israel as “THE God” (par excellence) or “Most High” (greater and more exalted than all others) that this implies more than one god. If that question crept into your mind, kudos to you! You’d be *correct*—and that brings us to the reason why so many evangelical scholars and pastors want the “sons of God” to be human beings in certain passages. They think having heavenly sons of God in certain passages puts polytheism in the Bible.

This uneasiness is felt especially acutely in Psalm 82, *since Psalm 82:1 and 82:6 identify the sons of God as plural elohim—gods*. But that is the literal and most straightforward understanding of the text. What opponents of the obvious meaning of the text miss is that the presence of more than one god in the Bible does *not* mean polytheism as we commonly use that word. If these last two sentences sound way out, stay with me. Let’s take a look at Psalm 82 (note my insertion of Hebrew and grammatical terms and the underlining):

A psalm of Asaph.

- ¹ God (*elohim*) stands in the divine council (literally, *council of El*);
among the gods (*elohim*) He pronounces judgment.
- ² How long will you (plural) judge unjustly,
showing favor to the wicked? *Selah*.
- ³ Judge the wretched and the orphan,
vindicate the lowly and the poor,
⁴ rescue the wretched and the needy;
save them from the hand of the wicked.
- ⁵ They neither know nor understand,
they go about in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth totter.
- ⁶ I said, “you (plural) gods (*elohim*),
sons of the Most High (*beney Elyon*), all of you (plural);
⁷but you (plural) shall die as men do,
fall like any prince.
- ⁸ Arise (the command is singular), O God (*elohim*),
judge (the command is singular) the earth,
for you (singular) shall inherit all the nations.

Despite the fact that it makes people uncomfortable, the text means what it says.⁴ In Psalm 82:1, the first *elohim* must be singular, since the Hebrew grammar has the word as the subject of a singular verb. The second *elohim* must be plural, since the preposition in front of it (“in the midst of”) requires more than one. You can’t be “in the *midst* of” *one* person. And according to Psalm 82:1, the singular God (*elohim*) of Israel presides over an assembly or council of other gods (*elohim*).⁵ Verse six makes it perfectly clear that these other *elohim* are the sons of the God of Israel. In that verse God himself is speaking (“I said”) to the other *elohim* of that divine council, and he addresses them with the plural “you.” He says point-blank: “you are gods (*elohim*), all of you.” The fact that he is speaking to a group (plural *elohim*) is made certain even in the English, since God also calls them “sons of the Most High.” I made the observation above that the Hebrew word for angels is *mal’akim* (literally, “messengers”), an entirely different term than occurs for the sons of God. If one still insisted against the inspired textual evidence that the two should be identified, you’d still need to explain why angels are called gods in light of Psalm 82:6.

Some who object to the obvious meaning of the text may assert that this psalm is actually describing God the Father speaking to the other members of the Trinity. This view results in heresy here, in some very obvious ways. First, not all the members of the Trinity are “sons.” The Holy Spirit is not the Son of God or a son of God. Second, if the passage has the Trinity in mind, then God is charging them with corruption! Verses 2-5 are quite clear that God is displeased with these other *elohim* in his council and has indicted them for their wicked rule. Third, this view would also have the Trinity sentenced to death! They would die like mortals (“as men do”). This can’t refer to the

death of Christ for three reasons: (a) the death sentence isn't restricted to just *one* son of God; (b) the death sentence is for personal guilt and corruption; (c) the Son (note the capitalization) who is God's own essence and uncreated, is superior to the other sons of God (more on that in a moment). Fourth, it is evident from the last verse that the judgment of the sons of God, these other *elohim*, has something to do with God's reclamation of the nations of the earth. The implication is that the sons of God have been ruling the earth and doing it wickedly, and so they must be removed for God's rule to come to full fruition. In other words, they are an impediment or a nuisance (or at best a disappointment). Certainly not the way we'd want to (or can) look at the Trinity.

But what about the view that the *elohim* upon whom God has placed a death sentence are human rulers? This, too, is incoherent. Ask yourself some questions of the text. What is the scriptural basis for the idea that God presides over a council of *humans* that governs the nations of the earth? Some commentators who reject the face-value meaning of Psalm 82 like to argue that Israel's council of seventy elders is in view here—that God is judging Israel's judges or elders for their corruption. This makes little sense, since at no time in the Scriptures did Israel's elders ever have jurisdiction over all the nations of the earth. In fact, as we'll see in the next chapter, the situation is exactly opposite—Israel was *separated* from the nations to be God's own possession and focus of his rule. Moreover, since when do the corrupt decisions of a group of humans make the foundations of the earth totter (v. 5)? Lastly, if these *elohim* are humans, why are they sentenced to die “like humans”? This is nonsensical, and is defeated by the grammar and structure of the Hebrew text.⁶ It would be akin to sentencing a child to grow up, or a dog to bark, or a human being to breathe. The point of verse 6 is that, in response to the corruption of the *elohim*, they will be stripped of their immortality at God's discretion and die like humans die. A clear contrast is set up in the text.

The real problem with the human view, though, is twofold. This view cannot be reconciled with: (1) other references in the Hebrew Old Testament that refer to a divine council and other *elohim*; (2) other passages in the Hebrew Bible speak of an act of God to divide the nations of the earth among the sons of God as a punishment for their rebellion—before there was a nation of Israel. Once you understand the texts we'll examine below, Psalm 82 becomes completely coherent—and frankly brings most of the entirety of the Old Testament into proper focus. For the remainder of this chapter we'll focus on the first issue: references to a heavenly council that make it clear that the council of Psalm 82 is comprised of God and other supernatural beings. We'll tackle council functions and related concepts in the chapters that follow.

There are several other places in the Hebrew Bible that speak of plural *elohim* and a heavenly council. Perhaps the most familiar passages where the sons of God show up are the first two chapters of Job:

Job 1:1ff.

¹ There was a man in the land of Uz named Job. That man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. ²Seven sons and three

daughters were born to him; ³his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred she-asses, and a very large household. That man was wealthier than anyone in the East. ⁴It was the custom of his sons to hold feasts, each on his set day in his own home. They would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. ⁵When a round of feast days was over, Job would send word to them to sanctify themselves, and, rising early in the morning, he would make burnt offerings, one for each of them; for Job thought, “Perhaps my children have sinned and blasphemed God in their thoughts.” This is what Job always used to do. ⁶And it came to pass, when the sons of God presented themselves before the LORD, Satan came along with them. ⁷The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you been?” Satan answered the LORD, “I have been roaming all over the earth.” ⁸The LORD said to Satan, “Have you noticed My servant Job? There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil!”

Job 2:1ff.

¹ Once again the sons of God presented themselves before the LORD. Satan came along with them to present himself before the LORD. ² The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you been?” Satan answered the LORD, “I have been roaming all over the earth.” ³ The LORD said to Satan, “Have you noticed My servant Job? There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil. He still keeps his integrity; so you have incited Me against him to destroy him for no good reason.” ⁴ Satan answered the LORD, “Skin for skin—all that a man has he will give up for his life. ⁵ But lay a hand on his bones and his flesh, and he will surely blaspheme You to Your face.” ⁶ So the LORD said to Satan, “See, he is in your power; only spare his life.”

In both these passages the Hebrew phrase translated, “the sons of God” is *beney ha-elohim*. Although I have the familiar “Satan” in this passage, the Hebrew word here (*saṭan*) is best translated “The Adversary” since it has the definite article prefixed to it (*hassaṭan*). Hebrew does not prefix proper names with the article, and neither does English (I am not “the Mike”). In the Intertestamental period and the New Testament era, *saṭan* became a proper name for God’s arch enemy. The word as used here actually refers to a being who exercises a prosecutorial function—one who accuses or indicts another person. In the ancient Near East, to which the Old Testament culturally belongs, this was a specific role within the divine council (see Zechariah 3:1-7 for perhaps the classic passage on this function).

The picture here is that the divine council is meeting for business, and The Adversary has a role in that meeting. The Hebrew text is ambiguous as to whether he is a member of the council or one of the sons of God.⁷ He may simply be an “officer” of the council at its meetings.⁸ One also encounters the sons of God (*beney ha-elohim*) in

Deuteronomy 32:8 (in the Dead Sea Scrolls material; see the next chapter for this passage) and Genesis 6:1-4 (see Chapter 6). Before moving on, take note of how the human view of the sons of God fails hopelessly here. There is simply no way that the sons of God could be human beings in Job 1-2.

One encounters the sons of God in the slightly variant spelling *beney elim* in two biblical passages. In Psalm 29:1, a verse that has suffered greatly at the hands of translators, the other *elohim* are commanded to worship Yahweh:

Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of God (*beney elim*),
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!

It is quite clear from this text that Yahweh is to be worshipped by other *elohim*, not the other way around. The God of Israel is qualitatively superior. Psalm 89:5-7 (Hebrew, vv. 6-8) echoes the same thought, and specifically references the divine council:

⁵ Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!

⁶ For who in the skies can equal the LORD,
Who can compare with the LORD among the sons of God (*beney elim*),

⁷ a God greatly dreaded in the council of the holy ones,
held in awe by all around Him?

I naturally underlined the phrase “sons of God” and obvious references to the divine council to draw your attention to their existence in the biblical text, but I also underlined “in the skies” and “all around him.” The reason is to emphasize that these sons of God are *in heaven* and *around God’s throne*. They are not a human council of judges. Once again, the human view is completely inadequate.

Perhaps the most striking scene of the divine council is found in I Kings 22. In that passage, the reader is privy to an actual council meeting concerning the evil king Ahab. I reproduce the whole chapter here (NRSV) for context (note the underlined portions):

¹ For three years Aram and Israel continued without war. ² But in the third year King Jehoshaphat of Judah came down to the king of Israel. ³ The king of Israel said to his servants, “Do you know that Ramoth-gilead belongs to us, yet we are doing nothing to take it out of the hand of the king of Aram?” ⁴ He said to Jehoshaphat, “Will you go with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?” Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, “I am as you are; my people are your people, my horses are your horses.”

⁵ But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, “Inquire first for the word of the LORD.” ⁶ Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred of them, and said to them, “Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?” They said, “Go up; for the LORD

will give it into the hand of the king.”⁷ But Jehoshaphat said, “Is there no other prophet of the LORD here of whom we may inquire?”⁸ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “There is still one other by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me, but only disaster.” Jehoshaphat said, “Let the king not say such a thing.”⁹ Then the king of Israel summoned an officer and said, “Bring quickly Micaiah son of Imlah.”¹⁰ Now the king of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah were sitting on their thrones, arrayed in their robes, at the threshing floor at the entrance of the gate of Samaria; and all the prophets were prophesying before them.¹¹ Zedekiah son of Chenaanah made for himself horns of iron, and he said, “Thus says the LORD: With these you shall gore the Arameans until they are destroyed.”¹² All the prophets were prophesying the same and saying, “Go up to Ramoth-gilead and triumph; the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.”

¹³ The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him, “Look, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably.”¹⁴ But Micaiah said, “As the LORD lives, whatever the LORD says to me, that I will speak.”

¹⁵ When he had come to the king, the king said to him, “Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?” He answered him, “Go up and triumph; the LORD will give it into the hand of the king.”¹⁶ But the king said to him, “How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?”¹⁷ Then Micaiah said, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the LORD said, ‘These have no master; let each one go home in peace.’”¹⁸ The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy anything favorable about me, but only disaster?”

¹⁹ Then Micaiah said, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him.”²⁰ And the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ Then one said one thing, and another said another,²¹ until a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’”²² ‘How?’ the LORD asked him. He replied, ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then the LORD said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it.’²³ So you see, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has decreed disaster for you.”

²⁴ Then Zedekiah son of Chenaanah came up to Micaiah, slapped him on the cheek, and said, “Which way did the spirit of the LORD pass from me to speak to you?”²⁵ Micaiah replied, “You will find out on that day when you go in to hide in an inner chamber.”²⁶ The king of Israel then ordered, “Take Micaiah, and return him to Amon the governor of the city and to Joash the king’s son,”²⁷ and say, ‘Thus says the king: Put this fellow

in prison, and feed him on reduced rations of bread and water until I come in peace.’ ”²⁸ Micaiah said, “If you return in peace, the LORD has not spoken by me.” And he said, “Hear, you peoples, all of you!”

Note from this remarkable vision of the true prophet of Yahweh that the deliberative assembly is once again in the presence of God. There is no possibility that this is a human council.

There are other references to the corrupt gods of the nations—and not idols—outside immediate divine council contexts. They affirm that other gods were part of the worldview of Israel in the Hebrew Bible. The first list below contains passages where the word *elohim* or *ha-elohim* is in the Hebrew text where you read “gods.” The second list has verses where the Hebrew word is *elim*.

The plural *elohim* / *ha-elohim*

Psalm 86:8 - Among the gods there is none like you, O Yahweh; neither [are there any works] like your works.

Psalm 95:3 - For Yahweh is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

Psalm 96:4 - For Yahweh is great, and deserving of exceedingly great praise: he is to be feared above all gods.

Psalm 97:7 - All who served images were put to shame; those who boasted in mere idols; even all the gods bow down before him [Yahweh, see v. 5 preceding]

Psalm 97:9 - For you, O Yahweh, are Most High above all the earth: you are exalted far above all gods.

Psalm 135:5 - For I know that Yahweh is great, and that our lord is above all gods.

Psalm 136:2 - O give thanks to the God of gods: for his mercy endures for ever.

Psalm 138:1 - I will praise you with my whole heart: before the gods will I sing praise to you.

The plural *elim*

Exodus 15:11 – Who is like you, O Yahweh, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?⁹

Psalm 58:1 - Do you indeed decree what is right, O gods? Do you judge people fairly?¹⁰

It is common for those who resist the face-value meaning of the text of Psalm 82:1, 6 to argue at this point that such references to other gods are actually references to idols, or that they are figurative expressions—that Israelites didn't really believe such beings exist. The first objection is discussed in detail in the next chapter. For now take another look at Psalm 97:7 in the above list. It clearly *distinguishes* the gods from idols. The psalmist mocks the people who bow down to idols, and adds that even the gods who the idols represent bow down to Yahweh! The second objection is best addressed here.

Those who want to argue that these references to other gods cannot be taken as reflecting what Israelites really believed don't realize how that objection does injustice to both the biblical text and the God of Israel. What I mean here is that, if the above verses are not conveying factual information relative to biblical theology, then God's superiority is a mockery. For example, if Moses is comparing Yahweh to beings that don't exist, how is Yahweh glorified. To have Moses "really" saying "Who is like you, O Yahweh, among the beings that aren't real" is to judge God's greatness by nothing. *We're* greater than something that doesn't exist! So is a microbe. This view unintentionally brings God down quite a few notches, to say nothing of the deception involved on Moses' part—and even God's since he inspired the words. Saying "among the beings that we all know don't exist there is none like Yahweh" is tantamount to comparing Yahweh with Mickey Mouse, Spiderman, or some fictional literary figure. This reduces praise to a snicker. It also makes the writer somewhat mentally unbalanced. He sings Yahweh's praise before beings he really believes aren't there? He commands the same imaginary beings to worship Yahweh (Psa. 29:1)? Worse yet, Yahweh presides over a council of beings that don't exist? Why would the Holy Spirit inspire such nonsense?

More substantive is the fact that those who don't want to take the text for what it says in such verses fear that they might be affirming polytheism as part of the belief system of the biblical writers. This is a concern only in that we use the word "monotheism" in a particular way that means "the belief that no other gods exist," as opposed to "the belief that there is one *unique* God."¹¹ Polytheistic religions typically have a group of gods who fight and scheme against one another for power, and sometimes leadership of the lead god in charge can (and does) change in such religions. These systems also universally assume that the gods can be identified with parts of the creation, and that at least subset of the pantheon is basically equal in power and ability (or they have powers and abilities that offset the powers and abilities of the other "top tier" gods). Other terms relevant to this question are also flawed, such as *henotheism* (the belief in one superior god among other gods) and *monolatry* (the belief that you should worship only one god though others exist). These terms are deficient in that they do not sufficiently describe what the biblical writers believed. Henotheistic systems can have the lead god toppled and replaced by another god who then becomes "superior" (one wonders on what grounds, since just prior to that the god was inferior). Monolatry fails to articulate *why* one God is superior and *what criteria* make him superior—it comments only on worship.

Israel's faith cannot be adequately understood by any of the terms above as we understand them today. The faith described in the Hebrew Bible is one that has one, single "species unique" Deity, who created other lesser deities to rule under his authority. By definition they are qualitatively inferior since they are created beings.¹² The God of Israel alone is Creator of all that is, the lone sovereign, the only uncreated being, the only omnipotent and omniscient being there is, and thus the single legitimate object of our worship. One word may not be sufficient to capture all this, but the Hebrew Old Testament makes this understanding abundantly clear. To say that a divine council of plural *elohim* means polytheism requires ignoring Israel's description of its God and the other gods.

The "species-uniqueness" of Yahweh also answers the question of how the co-creating and co-ruling Son is different than the other sons of God. God's "special agent" (the Word, Wisdom) is unique in that *he is Yahweh's own uncreated essence*. This "second Yahweh" is repeatedly identified with the Son (Jesus) in the New Testament since he became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. This explains why Jesus is described in the New Testament as *monogenes*, a Greek term typically (and poorly) translated "only begotten." You no doubt recall from an earlier chapter that there is a difference between "created" and "begotten." I didn't get into the Greek terminology there, but it's helpful now.

"Only begotten" is an unfortunately confusing translation, especially for modern readers. It does sound to us as though the "only begotten" Son had a beginning because we aren't used to the old English word. The confusion should never have happened, though, since *monogenes* actually doesn't mean "only begotten." The controversy extends from an old misunderstanding of the root of the Greek word. For many years *monogenes* was thought to have derived from two Greek terms, *monos* ("only") and *gennao* ("to beget, bear"). Scholars of Greek linguistics have discovered, though, that the second part of the word *monogenes* does not come from the Greek verb *gennao*, but rather the noun *genos* ("class, kind"). The term literally means "one of a kind" or "unique" with no connotation of time or origin. The validity of this understanding is borne out by the New Testament itself. In Hebrews 11:17, Isaac is called Abraham's *monogenes*—but it is crystal clear from the Old Testament that Isaac was *not* the only son Abraham had begotten, since he had also fathered Ishmael prior to Isaac. The term must mean that Isaac was Abraham's "unique" son, for he was the son of the covenant promises and the line through which Messiah would come. Many of the more recent versions of the Bible have opted to translate *monogenes* as "only," but this confuses readers when they come across references to other sons of God in the Old Testament.

The end result of all this is that the Hebrew Old Testament teaches that Israel's God was utterly unique—not just in terms of ability, but also in essence as the lone pre-existent and uncreated being. The God of Israel had a co-ruler and co-creator, who was his own unique essence manifested as a second person. This second person went by many names, two of which (Word, Wisdom) we have already discussed, and was viewed by New Testament writers as being incarnated in Jesus. The other sons of God can make no such claims. They are of another "species" and thus by definition beneath the Father

and Son. They serve Yahweh and his co-sovereign in the divine council and accept their punishments for disobedience. The essence and status of the Father and Son will never and can never change. They will not be displaced or usurped as polytheism and henotheism allow, because they are unmatched and unmatched in essence and power. There is only one Yahweh, and his co-regent, the Son *is him*.

As explosive as this chapter is, it only prepares us for what's to come. The divine council shows up in other quite unexpected places, some of the most important passages in the Bible. Their story is at the heart of God's original intention for humanity, the Fall, the story of Israel and the nations, and the ancient plan for the redemption of humanity. We need only lose the scales of tradition that have covered our eyes. Your journey into the world of the patriarchs and prophets has just begun.

¹ See Appendix ___ for a full discussion.

² I am using only English letters to “spell” this Hebrew term rather than strictly proper transliteration for reasons of convenience for English readers.

³ See Appendix ___ for how *elim* in this phrase still points to a singular being. However, *elim* by itself and not following “sons of” (Hebrew, *beney*) can only mean plural “gods” (cf. Job 41:17).

⁴ See Appendix ___ for a detailed analysis of the Hebrew grammar and syntax of Psalm 82.

⁵ What follows in this chapter is a basic introduction to the divine council. Aside from the Appendixes related to this chapter, for more information on the divine council see E. Theodore Mullen, “Divine Assembly,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol.2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 214-217; S. B. Parker, “Council (Sod),” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 1999); and Michael S. Heiser, “Divine Council,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Intervarsity Press, forthcoming).

⁶ See Appendix ___.

⁷ The questions are difficult to answer given the paucity of the biblical material relevant to the discussion. See Appendix ___.

⁸ We will discuss Satan in more detail in other chapters.

⁹ This verse requires a brief comment. All scholars and translators agree (due to the obvious context) that the Hebrew text here is *elim*. I mention this because the plural here is spelled with the normal “y” [yodh]. This note is important because of the next verse in the discussion, Psalm 58:1. Many English translations do not recognize the shortened spelling in that verse and so translations are often confusing (e.g., the word gets translated as something to do with “silence”). At other times, the reference to plural gods is deliberately obscured (e.g., NIV, “rulers”). Some of the more recent translations get Psalm 58:1 right (ESV, NRSV).

¹⁰ See the above footnote. Also note the content of this verse – that it has the gods judging humanity unjustly, just like Psalm 82. See the next chapter for the rulership of the gods / sons of God and their corruption.

¹¹ The word as coined in the 17th century as an antonym to atheism, and subsequently imposed on the ancient Semitic (Israelite) mind by modern people.

¹² Those passages that have the God of Israel creating the other gods of the council are detailed in the next chapter.